

SHUAR AND MUNDURUKU MODIFIED REMAINS: BIOARCHAEOLOGICAL PRACTICE AND POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUE IN SOUTH AMERICA

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Abstract

The purpose of this communication is to present reflections on the practice of collecting Munduruku and Shuar heads from colonial contexts, their subsequent curation in global museum collections, and the importance of understanding the origins of this collecting practice considering both the existence of «forgeries» and the continued search for «authentic» examples by collectors today. Our research aims to contribute to the discussion on the importance of bioanthropological analysis of these Ancestral remains when allied to postcolonial criticism and provenance research regarding how and why they were collected, curated and kept in museums. Given that these heads are a sensitive reminder of the problematic circumstances of their collection, postcolonial criticism is paramount to rethinking their curation, display, and use as part of scientific investigations.

Keywords: Human remains, museums, postcolonial critique, bioarcheology.

Resumen

RESTOS HUMANOS MODIFICADOS SHUAR Y MUNDURUKU: PRÁCTICA BIOARQUEOLÓGICA Y CRÍTICA POSCOLONIAL EN SUDAMÉRICA

El propósito de esta nota es presentar reflexiones acerca de la práctica de recolección de cabezas Munduruku y Shuar provenientes de contextos coloniales, de su subsecuente curaduría en colecciones museográficas globales y sobre la importancia de entender los orígenes de esta práctica de recolección, considerando tanto la existencia de «falsificaciones» como la búsqueda continua de ejemplares «auténticos» en la actualidad. Esta investigación busca contribuir con la discusión sobre la importancia del análisis bioantropológico de estos restos ancestrales, utilizando la crítica poscolonial e investigación sobre la proveniencia de estos restos, con respecto al cómo y porqué fueron recolectados, curados y resguardados en museos. Dado que estas cabezas son un sensible recordatorio de las problemáticas circunstancias de su recolección, la crítica poscolonial es sumamente importante para repensar su curaduría, exhibición y uso como parte de investigaciones científicas.

Palabras clave: restos humanos, museos, crítica poscolonial, bioarqueología.

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1. HUMAN MODIFIED REMAINS

The use of parts of the human body as trophies or relics has been a worldwide phenomenon in both the prehistoric and historic past and the present. These body parts included heads, teeth, forearms, scalps, hands, fingers, ears, hair, various organs, and skin. Human heads are often deemed as valuable, given their association with the spirit of the individual, as well as concepts of strength, intelligence, and power (Arnold and Hastof 2016). In the Eurocentric tradition, the term «head-hunting» has been interpreted under the ideas of war, religion, social prestige, and cannibalism (religious and or ritual motivation). Religious and social prejudices as well as racist worldviews led and still lead Europeans and others to misinterpret the nature and meaning of these heads. They were and still are seen by some as exotic, trophy heads desirable to collect, expose or trade when in fact they were remains of ancestors or enemies to be venerated within the communities of origin. Adventurers, colonizers, government officials, military personnel and missionaries bought or stole these heads of «barbarians and savages» and sold or donated them to museums in Europe, North America and, to a lesser extent, Colonial-era museums in source countries themselves (Dye 2016).

The historical record suggests that these colonial era collectors themselves saw their collections at least in part as trophies, a mentality that arguably continues to this day (Huffer and Graham 2017; Graham *et al.* 2020). Additionally, Eurocentric perspectives (deeply rooted in naive interpretations of Indigenous cultural behavior) are reinforced through modern entertainment and popular media (Dye and Keel 2012). Among Indigenous communities that engaged in the practice of modifying heads of deceased persons, two of the most well-known examples come from South America: The Munduruku and the Shuar.

1.1. Munduruku

Munduruku communities (who call themselves Wuyjuyu) in historical times inhabited Northern Brazil (mostly Pará State) and are currently one of the most politically active Indigenous groups of the region, fighting against deforestation, goldmining, a hydroelectric power plant, and Covid-19 in their territory (Ramos 2003; Inman and Smis 2018). The earliest records that mention the making of these heads date between 1820 and 1830 and head preparation persisted until the late 19th century. According to Schlothauer (2014), although there are mentions of such heads by many traveling naturalists that visited Brazil during the 19th century, including Spix and Martius (1823-1831) and the members of the Langsdorff expedition (1822-1829), these are quite brief. Only in the 1870s did Barbosa Rodrigues (1875, 1882) provide a firsthand and detailed description of such ritual.

Regarding new osteological, anthropological, and archival research investigating curated Munduruku «trophy» heads within the context of their creation, use and collecting history, our current pilot-level project aims to first record their presence in museum collections and bring to light more information in terms of the history of their acquisition. Using CT scans, we also want to better understand how the heads were made and conduct craniometric and/or odontometric data for biodistance analysis between individuals and collections, where possible, and estimate the age at death and the sex of the individuals. The last topic would be mostly important because there is conflicting information in the documents regarding sex or age-specific selection of individuals. For example, Santos (1995: 36) mentions (our translation): «They do not care about the sex or age of their victims, only the numbers matter, once they intend to increase the collection of heads». On the other hand, Horton (1948: 278) stated that «Women and children of the enemy were taken prisoner (...). But enemy warriors were killed and their heads taken as trophies». Given that the making of Munduruku «trophy» heads apparently stopped in the first decade of the 19th Century (Schlothauer 2014), we aim to test whether or not forgeries are currently housed in these institutions, and in a larger sense, whether anthropometric data from museum collections

can better clarify the presence of authentic examples of these traditions circulating within today's market. In this paper, we provide context and justification for the research we intend to do in the future, once travel and collections access are more feasible.

We have found Munduruku heads mentioned to be held by many institutions worldwide: The British Museum, *Museu Nacional de Arqueologia* (Lisbon), *Museu Antropológico da Universidade de Coimbra*, *Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle de La Rochelle*, *Musée de l'Homme* (Paris), *MuseoArtPremier* in Marseille, *Etnografiska Museet* in Stockholm, *Museum Fünf Kontinente* in Munich, *Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etnografico Luigi Pigorini* in Rome, *Museo Cívico Etnográfico* in Modena, the American Museum of Natural History in New York, and *Museo de Culturas Indígenas Amazónicas*, in Iquitos (Peru). All the above institutions house only one individual, except for the British Museum, which houses two individuals. This information was obtained mainly through perusal of the online catalogues of these institutions, or through following the hashtags such as #humanskull, #skullcollection, #skullcollecting, #tribalantiques, #shrunkenhead, #jivaro, #tsantsa, #curiosity-cabinet, among others, on Instagram, which surfaced mainly photographs of the heads posted by museum visitors sharing their experience.

Some other institutions might have Munduruku heads, although we were not able to securely check the information. The *Casa Municipal da Cultura (Solar Condes de Resende)*, in Vila Nova de Gaia, Portugal supposedly holds two individuals, one that was described as having «European» characteristics (Pereira 1995). The Institute for Cultural Anthropology and European Ethnology in Göttingen might also have a Munduruku head, which was received by the German anthropologist Blumenbach in 1805 (Schlothauer 2012). It is suggested that two Munduruku heads are held in a museum in Florence (Fernandes *et al.* 2010), but the accuracy of this information is unclear. Although the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography in Saint Petersburg houses Munduruku artifacts (visualrian.ru, s.d.), the presence of such heads in the collection was not clearly verifiable.

In Brazil, we know of two heads still housed in collections, one at the *Museu Paulista* (in São Paulo. For an illustration, see von Ihering 1907) and another at the National Museum (in Rio de Janeiro). The specimen from the Museu Paulista has not been seen in recent times, although there is an illustration published in 1907. The individual curated at the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro might have had the same tragic fate as many of the museum's collections; destroyed by a fire in September 2018 (see Fernandes *et al.* 2010 for more details on the history of this specimen). This Munduruku head has been studied using CT scanning and the results were published in Santos *et al.* (2007). Similarly, the specimen housed at the University of Coimbra, Portugal, was analysed using x-ray and the results presented by Mendonça de Souza and Martins (2003-2004). These are, so far, the only systematic scientific studies made of Munduruku «trophy heads».

We have also started to investigate the origins and curatorship of the Munduruku head housed at the Weltmuseum in Vienna. The head was brought to Vienna by the Austrian naturalist Johann Natterer (1787-1843) in 1827 and was part of the exhibition of the Ethnographic collection of the Vienna Museum of Natural History in 1889. Despite the existence of fragmentary lists and notes (Schmutzer 2007), Natterer's diaries, unfortunately, are still untraceable. There has been discussion on whether the objects from the Munduruku (including the head) were collected by Peixoto, a Brazilian officer (Kapfhammer 2012; Pelzeln 1871: XII). As reported by Schlothauer (2014: 148) the head belonged to a «Parintintin (...) enemies of the Mundrucú» and was «preserved as a sign of victory and displayed on a stick at their warpaths – from Canomá».

Since 2017 the head is exhibited in the Weltmuseum Vienna in a display entitled «From warriors to political actors», which tells visitors how the Munduruku became political activists in the fight against environmentally destructive energy projects on their lands (Fig. 1). The head is presented along with other contextual elements, including feather headdresses, which are reported to have been used in a ceremony involving the head of an enemy. Prior to the exhibition, the exposition's curator Dr. Claudia Augustat had conducted consultation with representatives of the Munduruku who stated to have nothing to object to the exhibition of the head (Hickley 2018).



Figure 1. Munduruku remains exhibited at the Natural History Museum in Vienna. Photo: M. Okumura.

In parallel, a public dispute flared up, when the traditional auction house Dorotheum presented human heads from Nigeria, Benin, Borneo and New Guinea, among other places for sale in Vienna. The protests were initiated specifically by Faika El-Nagashi from the Green party, and led the Dorotheum to withdraw these human remains, including «trophy heads», from sale one hour before the auction begun (Austria Presse Agentur 2017; Kronsteiner 2017). Despite the controversies around the exhibition of human remains altogether (ICOM s.d.), the final decision to exhibit the Munduruku head in the Weltmuseum was reported in the media to be based on the fact that it was no longer a portrait of an individual, but instead an abstract ritual object, described by various naturalists to have been seen with respect and esteem among the Munduruku (Der Standard 2017; Wien.ORF.At 2017). Public criticism towards this exhibition, however, was intense and referred mainly to the absence of a warning that there were human remains in the exhibition, the absence of a clear description of the exhibited individual, which was an enemy and not a member of the Munduruku, as well as no mention of how Johann Natterer acquired this head (Hickley 2018). This Munduruku head is still exhibited in the Weltmuseum as well as virtually on its webpage (Weltmuseum website s.d.) but has gained much more contextual descriptions in the exposition, so that the controversies have slowed down.

1.2. Shuar

The other South American group known to have prepared human heads are the Shuar of the Amazonian rainforest of Southeastern Ecuador and Northern Peru, known of since the 15th century initially through the Inca chronicles (Stirling 1938) and thereafter often described in lurid headlines (see for example, Karsten 1923). Known as the only group that successfully revolted against the Spanish conquerors, the Shuar lived in households of patrilineal groups (Harner 1984).

They believed death was due to sorcery from the enemies, thus tribal warfare and «blood» revenge, mostly against other Shuar tribes, was frequent (Jandial *et al.* 2004). Even more important than killing the enemy, was to overpower the enemy's soul to become invincible. In the belief of the Shuar, producing a shrunken head, or a *tsantsa*, from the enemy would trap his soul and appease the victor's ancestral spirits (Karsten 1923; Souza *et al.* 2005; Sauvageau *et al.* 2007). However, in case a Shuar warrior would not secure the head of the killed enemy, a prepared head of a sloth would be used instead (Mütter 1975). The spiritual power of the *tsantsa* lasted about three to four years, after which the *tsantsa* could be discarded, given away or even traded. After the conquest the acculturated Shuar sold real *tsantsas* and prepared counterfeits for trade (Souza *et al.* 2005).

Several institutions house remains identified as Shuar modified heads, including the *Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Antropología e Historia del Perú* (Weiss 1958) and the Ethnography Museum of Gothenburg (Varldskultur Museerna website). Five heads were identified in the National Museum (Brazil) collection (Souza *et al.* 2005), which most probably were lost after the fire in 2018. There is the report of a single head from the Eretz Israel Museum, Tel Aviv (Hermon *et al.* 2011), another single head curated at the *Comissão Geológica Brasileira* in Belém city, Pará state, Brazil (Santiago Wolnei Ferreira Guimarães and Hilton P. Silva, oral communication, 2018). And another two at the The Mütter Museum at The College of Physicians of Philadelphia (Mütter 1975), as well as at least 44 heads curated at the Science Museum in London, 20 at the Smithsonian Institute, and one at the Elgin Museum (Houlton and Wilkinson 2016). These collections probably present a mixture of real *tsantsas* and forgeries. These are just a few institutions that present remains identified as Shuar heads.

The *tsantsas* curated at the Weltmuseum Vienna have also begun to be investigated as part of our project (Table 1). It seems that they were acquired by the museum through multiple procedures, including gift or donation, as well as buying. Available information regarding the origins of these heads is also diverse, although most of the records refers to Ecuador. All the remains can be identified as human (although the possibility of forgery cannot be ruled out, see Fig. 2), except one, which clearly belongs to a sloth (Fig. 3).

2. Further actions

Although some of the collectors and the procedures through which these Munduruku and Shuar heads reached the Weltmuseum Vienna are known (Table 1), much is left to discover. This regards especially the circumstances under which they were taken, robbed, bought under coercion, or received in exchange for Western goods or favors. Therefore, these heads must be considered as sensitive collections (Berner *et al.* 2011) and should be treated with care until their fate can be decided by descendant communities in collaboration with curators. The financial support received from the Austrian Ministry (Bundesministerium für Kunst, Kultur, öffentlicher Dienst und Sport) has recently authorised new projects that focus on provenance research of collections with colonial contexts to support the on-site work of one of us (Eggers) and her team in the Natural History Museum. Other museums contemplated by this financial support include Weltmuseum in Vienna, among other federal Viennese museums. Despite time constraints, limited personnel and huge collections that must be accounted for, provenance research on the remains mentioned herein will be further carried out as soon as possible.

We were also able to begin a pilot project in which we collected several categories of anthropometric data and made initial observations on suture style, perforations, skin tone, among others, in order to try to better understand how these particular Munduruku and Shuar heads were produced and thus begin to investigate the possibility of forgeries (Houlton 2018; Houlton and Wilkinson 2018).



Figure 2. Tsantsa housed at the Weltmuseum. Photos: M. Okumura.



Figure 3. Sloth head included in the tsantsa collection housed at the Weltmuseum. Photo: M. Okumura.

| Inventory N° | Location | Year of Acquisition | Collector(s) as on WM label | Documented Historical Information | Description of find in Inventory book | Details on collectors/ collection |
|--------------|---|---------------------|---|--|---|-----------------------------------|
| 13.711 | Ecuador, Montana (WM label on head) | 1881 | Prof. C. Hermann | Palaeo-ethnographic and ethnographic Objects from South America. Gift from Prof. C. Hermann from Vienna, Nibelungeng. 8, December 1881 (collected during a ...trip to South America, 1880) (Inv Book WM, D). | Prepared scalp with ... and feather ornament from the Jivaro-Indians in Ecuador. Without ornaments. See W. Reiss: Ein Besuch bei den Jivaro-Indianern, Verlag d. Ges. f. Erdk.... in Berlin 1880 (Inv Book D). | - |
| 15.137 | East-Ecuador (Inv Book WM) | 1882 | Engineer Ladislaus Kluger from Krakow (1849-1884) | Kluger, L. sent the well preserved "tete d'Indien" by post from Krakow to "le Conseiller d'Etat" for the Royal Museum in Vienna, as wished for. He sold it for a price of 250,- florins, that would compensate for the 100,- soles he bought it for in Lima (WM Correspondence from L. Kluger from 16.06.1881 and 19.07.1881). | Prepared scalp and facial skin with hair ... and feather ornament from the Jivaro-Indians in East-Ecuador. Cylinder in left earlobe. See W. Reiss: Ein Besuch bei den Jivaro-Indianern, Verlag d. Ges. f. Erdk.... in Berlin 1880 (Inv Book D). | - |
| 20.694 | Ecuador, Rio Morona (WM Inv Book Fe.) | 1884 | Consul and 2nd secretary of the French Legation in Santiago de Chile: Karl / Charles Wiener | Post XII. 1884. Antiques and ethnographica from Panama-Ecuador and Peru. Gifted by Karl Wiener, Consul and II Secretary of the French Mission in Santiago de Chile. Fe, Post. XII. Nr. 663-776.... 28. November 1884. 7th series Contemporaneous Salvages.... 148 / 758...Bones and dried skull from a Jivaro Indian from of the Huambiza family, at the Rio Morona, Ecuador ... was disponibilized (with more than 100 other objects- Note from SE) for Dr Ch. Wiener from the Anthropology and Ethnography Department NHMW, as signed by Heger on 28. Dec. 1884 (WM Collectors: Ch. Wiener). | Trophy head from the Jivaro-Indians from the family Huambiza from the Rio Morona, Ecuador. | - |
| 82.709 | No further Info in WM (label on head) | 1907 | Collection Paranagua; Loreto; Schoeller | No Documentation in WMW (further research needed) | Scalp trophy with cotton strings fixed to the pierced lips. Without further ornaments and relatively short hair. Original label: "tropheo da tribu Jibaro: Chanka". | - |
| 82.71 | No further Info in WM (label on head) | 1907 | Collection Paranagua; Loreto; Schoeller | No Documentation in WMW (further research needed) | Scalp trophy with cotton strings fixed to the pierced lips. Without further ornaments and relatively short hair. | - |
| 95.42 | Northern Andes, Peru, Bolivia (WM collectors: L. Pucher). Amazon basin (WM Inv Book Post XI - 1931) | 1931 | Leo Pucher | Post XI - 1931. Purchase from Leo Pucher, Bad-Ischl, Perneck 69, Oberösterr. Cost S 600,-. Peru and Bolivia. Nr. 79 1 trophy head (Note by SE: and dozens of other objects) with the Inventory Numbers 95 342-95 427" (WM Inv Book). Summary by SE: Leo Pucher writes that he collected at least 78 from the 88 items listed (excluding the head), from the river basin of the Amazon, since he lived with them (Note from SE: the Chunchos from Rio Apurimac? Chunchos were the indigenous groups that did not surrender to the spanish conquistadores (Luis Suárez Fernández, Historia general de España y América, p. 407, Ediciones Rialp, 1981). He further states he would expect to receive 800-900 Schilling for the 88 items, so he could travel again and study more (Post Nr XI/ 1931). | Shrunken head traded from the wild and very dangerous Chunchos. | - |

Table 1. Inventory number, location, year of acquisition, collectors, historical information, and description of the tsantsa curated at the Weltmuseum, Vienna. Information summarized and translated by Sabine Eggers according to documents from the Weltmuseum.

| Inventory N° | Location | Year of Acquisition | Collector(s) as on WM label | Documented Historical Information | Description of find in Inventory book | Details on collectors/ collection |
|--------------|--|---------------------|-----------------------------|---|--|--|
| 121.671 | South America or Panama (WM label on head) | 1927 | Lina Witsch (1883-1968) | Post XIX - 1927: Purchase from Lina Witsch, Hall in Tirol. Jivaro, South America (or Panama). (WM Inv Book Post XIX - 1927). | Trophy head (tsantsa), male, hair 80mm long, no hanging string, facial hair not burnt, little protruding lips, occipital stitching with skewed string (a sign of forgery according to Stirling 1936). 110 mm. | Karolina Witsch sold the shrunken head to the Völkerkundemuseum (today's Weltmuseum) in 1927. In the archives of Hall in Tirol no link to Peru/Ecuador was found (correspondence from Zanesco, Dr. A. Stadtarchiv Hall in Tirol to the WM). |
| 130.56 | Ecuador (WM Inv Book Post VI - 1945). | 1945 | Freiherr Anatol von Kalm | Post VI - 1945. Purchase from Anatol von Kalm, Wien XIII, Neblingergasse 4. South America, Ecuador, Jivaro. Cost: RM 4.000,-. (WM Inv Book Post VI - 1945). | Trophy head (tsantsa) from an older man, with beard and short hair... ear ornament with beetle wings, beans and seeds. Ornament on the forehead. A partially real tsantsa since prepared by order by a Jivaro on a victim killed during war or ambush. | |
| 160.447 | Ecuador, Province Morona-Santiago | 1979 | Heinrich Müller | Post 6/1979- Ecuador. Gift from Henrich Müller, Franz Sauerstr. 28, 5020 Salzburg (WM Inv Book Post 6/1979). | Shrunken head from a sloth. Two teeth penetrate through the lips and are tied with strings. Hanging string made from plant fibers. Ca 9,5cm, string 15cm. | Heinrich Müller was a humanitarian worker living with the Jivaro from 1973-1974. The 23 objects inventorized by P. Kann in 1979, including the sloth shrunken head, came from the Shuar, from the Province of Morona-Santiago, located between the rivers Pastaza and Santiago, from the villages: Sucua, Asunción, Taisha and Tuutin Enza. . (WM Inv Book Post 6 - 1979). |

Table 1 (continuation). Inventory number, location, year of acquisition, collectors, historical information, and description of the tsantsa curated at the Weltmuseum, Vienna. Information summarized and translated by Sabine Eggers according to documents from the Weltmuseum.

One of us (Huffer) is also engaged in the surveillance of auction houses, galleries with web presences, as well as social media and e-commerce platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. This work is ongoing, with the specific goal of monitoring the sale and purchase of human remains, including many allegedly authentic modified crania or mummified/preserved heads from numerous cultures with pre-contact and colonial era traditions of head-taking of enemies or ancestors, including *tsantsa*. This is part of research first begun in 2004 (Huffer and Chappell 2014) but has been most prolific from 2018 to the present under the title of *The Bone Trade Project* (<https://bonetrade.github.io/>), research conducted in conjunction with Dr. Shawn Graham (Department of History, Carleton University) and funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. In addition, the datasets and publications (e.g., Huffer and Graham 2017) resulting from this project also contribute to the overall mission of the *Alliance to Counter Crime Online* (<http://www.counteringcrime.org>), of which DH and Dr. Graham are two of the co-founders.

3. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, since their initial status as «objects» worthy of addition to one's «cabinet of curiosities», reflecting the imperialist efforts of European nations from the 16th century onwards, the significance of these remains, as well as the ways different parties (Colonial and contemporary Indigenous communities, collectors, anthropologists, law enforcement, among others) have engaged with them, have changed. The ethicality of the transactions that brought such «exotic» artifacts to Western collectors has been, and continues to be, questioned and the ethnography of collecting reveals the historically contingent intercultural relationships that made collecting possible (O'Hanlon and Welsch 2000: 3-4). During the Colonial past, knowledge was thought to be seamlessly incorporated into material objects, which were considered much more important and worthy of preservation than Indigenous people themselves, the initial focus of ethnographic interest. Currently, these heads are a sensitive reminder of the circumstances of collection that are considered problematic by current ethical standards, and museums and other institutions have been trying to change the ways in which such Ancestral remains are exhibited. For example, in late 2020, the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford decide to remove human remains from display, including the Shuar *tsantsa* (Pitt Rivers Museum website s.d.).

In the specific case of Austria, although the country did not have overseas colonies, as the exhibition at the Weltmuseum rightly acknowledge, the country was part of the colonial system and played an important role in it, being heavily involved in the European colonial «project» overall (Sauer 2012). Our first attempts to further understand the origins of Munduruku and Shuar «trophy» heads housed at this museum show an entangled history of complex relations among Indigenous communities, buyers, and traders. We believe that discussing the origins of such collections, as well as the process of changing perceptions of museums in terms of curatorship, exhibition, and scientific research is a fertile ground upon which bioarchaeology and provenance research can meaningfully imprint. Future work of this nature is also intended to lay the foundation for repatriation requests while allowing digital data and records of what returned collections contained, if agreed upon by all parties.

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